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Practical Approaches to Increasing the Utilization of Research

Steve Martin, Wales Centre for Public Policy, Cardiff University

Contact details: MartinSJ@cardiff.ac.uk

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Scholars and practitioners have engaged in longstanding debates about whether social science research can improve policy making and public service delivery. There are some compelling reasons why it should. Governments devote significant amounts of funding to training scholars and resourcing their research. They are entitled to a return on this investment. Engaging with governments and non-profit organizations also benefits researchers, providing them with valuable 'laboratories' that yield important insights and empirical data. Yet much of the evidence generated by academic research still fails to gain traction with policy makers and practitioners.

The reasons for this are well known. Some scholars fear that engaging with policy and practice will compromise their independence or that policy makers will draw selectively on research findings to support pre-existing prejudices and preferred policy options. Meanwhile policy makers complain that scholars appear reluctant to engage with "real world" issues, their research takes too long, and their findings are presented in ways that are not easily accessed by those outside the academy. More fundamentally, research findings are usually contingent and contested which means that scholars struggle to offer the clear-cut solutions craved by governments.

Some commentators have argued that the way to overcome these obstacles is through intermediaries who can translate academic research so that it addresses policy makers' needs. Two recent initiatives in the UK demonstrate the value of this knowledge brokering role.

In 2012 the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the UK's leading funder of social science research, established the "Local Government Knowledge Navigator" project to explore ways to increase the utilization of academic research by local governments. A three person team (comprising an experienced academic, a former local authority chief executive and a retired civil servant) interviewed senior politicians and bureaucrats to identify their evidence needs. We also analyzed the research that had been funded by the ESRC over the previous five years to identify studies and scholars with relevant knowledge and expertise. We then commissioned a series of 'need to know' reviews that summarized the evidence on topics that had been identified as priorities by policy makers and practitioners. We also researched and documented successful partnerships between academics and local governments and made a series of recommendations for strengthening knowledge exchange between academia and local government (Allen, Grace, and Martin 2015;

http://www.solace.org.uk/knowledge/reports_guides/Making%20the%20Most%20of%20Research%2020150531.pdf).

The following year the Public Policy Institute for Wales was established to enable Welsh Government Ministers to access academic research and expertise. The institute, which is part of the UK's network of What Works Centres, meets regularly with ministers to discuss their evidence needs and then works with academics to provide independent analysis and advice (for further information see ppiw.org.uk). By responding directly to ministers' expressions of their own needs and priorities, we can be confident of the demand for the evidence that we provide.

This way of working contrasts with a traditional linear generate-transmit-adopt approach where research is designed and undertaken by academics with little, if any, engagement with potential users. We tailor our output to each minister's needs and use a variety of methods including one-to-one briefings with experts, evidence reviews, workshops, modelling, and written reports and summaries. We also take care to translate research findings so that they can be assimilated easily by busy politicians. By drawing on existing knowledge, evidence and expertise from within the academy, rather than commissioning new research, we are able to respond more rapidly than conventional research. And we have found that asking scholars who have devoted their careers to studying a policy problem to apply their expertise to an issue that has been identified by a minister can produce a depth of analysis and a long-term perspective that political advisers and officials, who often change roles every two to three years, find it difficult to offer.

The Local Government Knowledge Navigator and the work of the Public Policy Institute for Wales provide useful insights into ways of increasing the utilization of research. They demonstrate that policy makers and practitioners—in local and central government – are able to articulate a wide range of evidence needs that could potentially be addressed by academic research and expertise but they frequently fail to make the links. This disconnect reflects systemic failures on both the supply and demand sides. Partnerships between scholars and policy makers or practitioners are often ad hoc affairs, dependent on enthusiasts who find a way to work together in spite of rather than because of the structures, values and reward systems that operate in government and our universities. Systematic knowledge mobilization requires a more intentional approach to conceiving, conducting, and communicating research, which calls for changes in culture, capacity, and connectivity.

We need to realign priorities and incentives in government and in academia to encourage engagement. Universities should consider how to equip their faculty to engage in policy relevant research and reward them for doing so. Governments need to increase their absorptive capacity by upskilling bureaucrats so that they are able to identify rigorous research and use it to inform policy decisions. Finally, we need to invest in and experiment with ways of strengthening the 'connective tissues' that link research to policy and practice and vice versa. We should harness the potential of web-based hubs to link academics and policy makers and make greater use of staff exchanges that enable policy makers to join research teams and gain a greater appreciation of the value of academic expertise and researchers to spend time embedded in government and to witness firsthand the intricacies of the policy process.